

Indigenous entrepreneurship projects: working with the invisible. Experiences from the local south, Chile

Article (Published Version)

Soto Hernandez, Daniela (2020) Indigenous entrepreneurship projects: working with the invisible. Experiences from the local south, Chile. *Sentio journal* (2). a3 20-25. ISSN 2632-2455

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/102899/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Indigenous entrepreneurship projects: working within the invisible. Experiences from the local south, Chile

Daniela Soto Hernández, Doctoral Researcher, International Development Program, University of Sussex, UK, d.soto@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract

In Latin America, rural indigenous communities are one of the most vulnerable groups. In recent years, public and private initiatives worldwide have been focusing on indigenous entrepreneurship as a way to tackle poverty. In 2014, the Chilean government and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) started the Indigenous Development Program (PDFI). As a researcher and consultant involved in the programme, I was immersed into a complex network of power, incentives, and knowledge struggles among a wide variety of social actors involved in the programme, including: government and international agencies; leaders and members of indigenous communities; academics; and “experts”. This complex network posed many ethical questions that not only exceeded our control as a group, but also enforced ethical boundaries of Western “development projects”. As such, this article will reflect on and critically engage with issues around positionality, power/knowledge, coloniality, and key assumptions that surrounded our experience in Chile. It aims to show and unravel liminal spaces about ethical issues, as well as complex constraints for ethical development within communities exposed to extreme poverty, exclusion, and violence. Finally, I discuss several challenges for further research and work with communities in these contexts.

Introduction: indigenous entrepreneurship in Chile

Westernised social sciences and knowledge have been increasingly criticised by feminist and post/decolonial voices, among others (Escobar, 2012; Franks, 2002; Grosfoguel, 2013; Haraway, 1988; Mignolo, 2017, 2014; Quijano et al., 2014; Sardar, 1999). These efforts have helped to provincialise Western knowledge as a specific and privileged space of knowledge production (Grosfoguel, 2013) and understand its devastating effects over other epistemologies and ontologies.

Even though these critiques have emerged, the hegemonic knowledge and practices have not changed substantially. As acknowledged by Schöneberg (2019), this is certainly the case in development research, theory, and practice. The Euro-centred capitalist colonial modern world continues to define the problems and the solutions (Quijano, 2000). This is particularly detrimental for groups that have already been excluded and discriminated, such as indigenous people.

South America, particularly Chile, is not an exception in this regard, where conflicts with indigenous people still persist. In Chile, the end of the military dictatorship entailed the beginning of a new approach from the state towards indigenous people in the 1990s. Following “policies of recognition”, the state focused on the improvement of the material conditions and the generation of new ways to recognise indigenous cultures (Gobierno de Chile, 2004; Vergara et al., 2005). However, 30 years later, the public policies implemented as part of this approach have not been successful in solving continued cycles of poverty and violence (MDS, 2017).

In this context, the Chilean government started an indigenous entrepreneurship programme with the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). International aid experts claimed that by lending loans to indigenous communities as “starting capital” to develop high-impact initiatives, they could capitalise upon their “resources” (lands, fauna, flora, funga) and make their own way out of poverty. In this narrative, integrating indigenous people and territories to the global market would benefit the market, the government, and the indigenous communities themselves, as already shown in countries like the USA, Canada, and Australia.

This “successful recipe” towards development was the basis for the partnership between the IADB and the Chilean government in 2014. The idea was that the IADB would finance an indigenous entrepreneurship programme that would recognise the cultural differences within indigenous communities and reinforce traditional indigenous leadership. The programme had a community-led approach and it was structured in three stages (building the project and the life plan; economic and social appraisal; and economic feasibility) to get a guarantee from the state to ask for a loan from a bank (MDS, 2018).

My participation in the entrepreneurship project started after the first projects of the programme were launched, and it was the result of an invitation from the leader of an indigenous community to the Center for Intercultural and Indigenous Research at the Pontificia Catholic University of Chile, where I was working. This led me to participate, as researcher and consultant, in three other (related) projects, thus gaining access to a wide network associated with the programme, including: governmental agencies; indigenous communities; other professionals such as architects, designers, biologists, and engineers both from the same and other universities; and with the international donor (IADB). As our methods varied according to the type of project and the needs and ideas of our counterparts, we were able to engage with a range of different research methods, including: ethnography; interviews; surveys; and participative cartographies.

This two-year experience gave me access to a complex colonial network of power struggles in the context of “development” and, unexpectedly, to contested territories and vulnerable indigenous communities. To account for my experience and engage critically with my own positionality, the aim of this article is to problematise the neocolonial approach of these types of projects, both within development and the social sciences. Following Alcoff’s (1988) definition, I will consider positionality as relational within a particular context, as well as a location where multiple social categories encounter and where located meaning is constructed. Nonetheless, in this case, my reflexivity comes from the position others gave me in the field, the positions others had, and the way I perceived them in their relationship with me.

In what follows, I will expose my own reflections, assumptions, and issues of positionality and power/knowledge in the neocolonial realm of development projects and present challenges for further research. These reflections are based not only in the post/decolonial literature, but also emerge from my own participation in the projects and reflections on some of the issues the different teams encountered, and on conversations with members of each project.

Entering the field: neocolonial labyrinth

Acknowledging that working on development issues is always contested, we tried to avoid the failures of past as well as extractive research (Escobar, 2012; Gardner and Lewis, 1996). Since we were going to produce knowledge, but were from Western institutions (universities), attention needed to be paid to the dynamics of power/knowledge. As stated by Foucault (2015), power and knowledge are deeply intertwined, with all forms of knowledge constituting power relations, and vice versa.

Therefore, as a way to tackle hierarchies and power abuse, our idea was to practise an active participant methodology (Contreras, 2002; Melero, 2011), which focuses on doing initiatives *with* the people, not *for* the people. Secondly, before writing anything for a bidding process, we would talk about the conditions and ask what our partners (indigenous communities) needed or wanted. Was there something that they wanted to know about Western social science methodologies? From there, the methodologies and outcomes were discussed according to the interest of the communities, our skills and capabilities, and the requirements and timing of each of the bidding processes.

Nevertheless, reality proved to be more complex than our good intentions. We were outsiders, and all Western projects had timings and regulations that were inadequate to build trust and to get to know each other sufficiently well to be able to select appropriate methodologies for each group. In one of the most awkward moments we experienced, we needed to ask our research participants to sign a consent form whilst we were sat at a table being served *mate* and *sopaipillas*¹ – a situation where signing papers was considered as either an interruption or an act of mistrust. However, project regulations would not consider an interview valid in the absence of written consent. And funding, in turn, would only be provided if we were able to account for our research progress.

Moreover, it was hard to overcome the fact that we were not in our community and we were holding several power privileges. Not only were we labelled as “the experts” throughout the projects, but there were also marked differences in terms of class, race, and area of residency. We held academic professions, which in Chile are usually a symbol of upper-middle-class, the professionals among us were non-indigenous, and we all lived in the capital, far away from the regions where the communities lived.

¹ Traditional type of fried pastry usually made from wheat flour and pumpkin. It is generally handmade in rural areas and it is used as an alternative for bread.

Above all these issues, we found ourselves in rough contexts of violence and exclusion. The invisible dichotomy “appropriation/violence” of the *abysmal thought* that characterises Western modernity as a socio-political paradigm, according to De Sousa Santos (2010b) and in contrast with the visible dichotomy “regulation/emancipation”, was nothing but explicit. In those parts of the globe, both appropriation and violence have been the inseparable duet that played their song for centuries all over the territories, humans, and non-human beings.

At the same time, we realised that in most cases, the trajectory of the political leaders, their daily issues with the projects and other initiatives, intensified their distance from the community members. In some cases, we witnessed the works of power in the context of violence: after centuries of being transgressed, the violence one can ignore in order to live becomes mixed up with the violence one has internalised. It is very similar to Fanon’s (1999) recognition when he realised that the *colonized dream to become the colonizer*. Then, it becomes reproduced violence. Those were “the micro-(bio)politic effects” of coloniality, exposed by Machado Araoz (2013):

“... the effects of the systematic and brutal exercise of wide historical forms of violence has had and has as a constitutive vector of the subjectivities that “are born” in colonial settings” (p.20).

We witnessed how the leaders claiming to be representatives of their community members were, instead, part of profound conflicts and, on one occasion, arrived at a critical point of a “community war” mixed with state violence. This led me to wonder about the invisible dynamics within the network, and the assumptions that, without us realising, determined the projects.

Looking around: problematic assumptions

The regulations of the projects and the cruelty of the widespread penury turned my attention to the issues that were invisible in our interactions while deeply affecting them, as well as to our own ability to find ethical answers to so many critical issues. How can you work ethically and move with integrity in a place that you do not know? How can you understand your situated positionality when you are an outsider? What can you do to avoid the use of power privileges when you cannot assess how far they separate you from the members of the community? These questions must be addressed to understand how our work strengthens or weakens power relations.

As such, the challenge was to identify the invisible, which were the assumptions each actor had before and during the projects. To begin with, the entire network worked with the assumption of *understanding*: that is, the idea that through oral or written communication, two or more social actors have the same understanding, or at least, that the social actor who receives the message understands what the sender intended to say. In this article, I expose the problematic assumption of *representation*, the idea that institutions (states, organisations, and indigenous communities) represent people’s needs, interests, opinions, and life projects and that there is a level of democracy in the flow of resources and intentions. This assumption presents itself at different scales. In their procedures, the IADB works as if the states were representative of all the people that live in the territory claimed by the nation-state. In turn, state agencies assume that the leaders of indigenous communities are representatives of a unified collective called ‘communities’. Likewise, universities and consultants are perceived within the network as *experts*, therefore representatives of *expert knowledge*.

These assumptions are problematic. States can hardly be thought of as unitarian, as they are the centre of political struggles, and in the case of Latin America, they have been accused of exercising violent state repression (Coraggio and Laville, 2014; Hale and Millaman, 2005). Moreover, it was clear that there were also deep differences and conflicts among governmental agencies, which meant that one decision might not get through if it involved other ministries or departments. In the case of indigenous communities, the problem was bigger as it directly affected the integrity and lifestyles of the people. Indeed, there is a huge difference between the “indigenous community” as a legal figure and the “imagined indigenous community” as a collective space of belonging. The first is widespread in Chile as a legal mechanism to secure ancestral lands and benefits from the state. They could have a common ancestor, but it does not mean that they want to live together, share ideas about their future, or develop projects together, as thought under the imaginary of communities. In several cases, this legal figure also made invisible old conflicts between families and created space for power abuse.

Without knowing and acknowledging those differences, outsiders (especially international “aid”) often work with community elites (Platteau, 2004), which can create and deepen internal conflicts and sharpen power inequalities. Clapp and Dauvergne (2011) show that international aid not only has its own agenda but responds to certain frameworks and directly introduces certain practices and recommendations as part of their political-economic model.

On the other hand, “expert” covered a wide range of people, situations, experiences, and power/knowledge with some sort of power privilege. Although all experts were from the Global South, it is always contested to attribute expertise about certain cultures and territories to an outsider (especially when that expertise comes from Western knowledge). In fact, expertise itself was understood very differently among social actors. In those indigenous communities, experience is locally conceived, referring to *certain* places and people. Usually, experts are wise elders who know their history, old practices, and rituals. In many cultures, they perform the role of indigenous leaders and participate in decision making. Depending on the realm of life, women and men will have different expertise. As such, a group of young outsiders were anything but experts about their cultures and territory to them.

This was a very good position from which to work together, as I did not consider myself an expert either. However, governmental and international aid agencies thought differently. For them, we were the experts. We wanted to build a collaborative project based on both our and our partners’ interests, however, our indigenous partners were not allowed to claim academic expertise. On the contrary, we knew that our knowledge was part of a world that indigenous communities struggled to understand, as we struggled to understand theirs.

Who am I here? Well-being, positionality, and integrity

The invisible assumptions draw my attention towards another problem. It was not just trust that I needed to gain, but a sense of my own position within the projects. I summarise this challenge in three main ethical dilemmas: well-being, positionality, and integrity. The first, well-being, is about deciding whether to get involved when there is a lack of information or time to understand the terms in which the involvement will occur. This dilemma was directly related to my own well-being as researcher and it meant that I might encounter unexpected problems with each action I took. For example, by working with one family, I received threats from another one. To what extent was I at risk? Were there enough measures to protect me/us?

The second dilemma came from my own positionality. I was perceived as an outsider not only to the community, but to the local social actors, as I was from Santiago. My closeness to all the territories was based on the recognition of a national state that we were all part of, a shared nationality. The same national state that is accused of suppressing indigenous people through imprisonment and the killing of their leaders. After years of exploitation, depredation, and dispossession by accumulation, as well as accumulation by dispossession, was it better to be Chilean? Was that a burden that I had to take with me? Was our team reproducing the centre-periphery power hierarchies?

Finally, I started rethinking my own integrity as a professional. What happens when you find yourself in a project that (as far as you understand) has silenced community members? What remained invisible to my eyes? This also presented a way of going back to the first ethical questions that we must address before taking part in a project: Who will benefit from it? What power hierarchies exist and how will the project affect them?

Conclusion

By briefly exposing different issues that our group faced and re-thinking them with a postcolonial and decolonial lens, I aimed through this paper to contribute to a more reflexive decolonial applied social science. Personal and professional experience have led me to deeply question the possibilities of social science to contribute towards decoloniality, particularly when faced with vulnerable contexts. More reflection is needed to critically address the possibilities social scientists have to work towards processes of self-determination, overcoming the neocolonialism usually reproduced by “experts from the outside”, and the possibility of contributing towards *epistemicides*, i.e. exterminating knowledge and ways of knowing (De Sousa Santos, 2010a).

The position of the outsider, and not living in one’s fieldwork environment, makes any attempt more difficult, as we might not be present to address the consequences of our actions. It also draws attention to us as vulnerable observers (Behar, 2012), since we need to be reflexive about the surroundings and the consequences of our

actions, and not only engaging with our feelings. Questions about our own feelings and thoughts must be considered alongside questions about the origin and effects of violence, as well as contextual issues such as the circumstances in which the use of our own position of power has the potential to inflict harm or increase vulnerability and exclusions. As pointed out by Goetschel (2018, p.12), there is a great responsibility when working among conflicts, which “demands constant questioning and searching for the best possible alternatives to what is already being achieved”.

Ethical issues are present during the entirety of projects, but we do not always have the information required in order to best respond or react to the challenges we face at the time they occur. However, having awareness and thinking in advance of mechanisms to deal with ethical uncertainties can already make a great difference. Similarly, by thinking and reflecting about the assumptions of a project, we can engage with methodologies that can help us adapt to particular circumstances, and deal with uncertainties, power imbalances, and colonial assumptions. Therefore, instead of running away from conflicts, we can help to build new approaches avoiding epistemicide and participate in projects that help towards constructing self-determination.

References

Alcoff, L. (1988) Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory, *Signs*, 13, 405–436.

Behar, R. (2012) *The vulnerable observer: anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Clapp, J. and Dauvergne, P. (2011) *Paths to a Green World*, 2nd edn. London: The MIT Press.

Contreras, R. (2002) La Investigación Acción Participativa (IAP): revisando sus metodologías y sus potencialidades, in Durston, J. and Miranda, F. (eds.) *Experiencias y metodología de la investigación participativa*. Santiago: Serie Políticas Sociales, 9-18.

Coraggio, J.L. and Laville, J.L. (eds.) (2014) *Reinventar la izquierda en el siglo XXI: hacia un diálogo Norte-Sur*. Los Polvorines: Nacional de General Sarmiento.

De Sousa Santos, B. (ed.) (2010a) *Epistemologías del sur*. Mexico: Siglo XXI.

De Sousa Santos, B. (2010b) *Para descolonizar Occidente: más allá del pensamiento abismal*. Buenos Aires: Consejo Latino Americano de Ciencias Sociales CLACSO: Prometeo libros.

Escobar, A. (2012) *Encountering development: the making and unmaking of the third world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fanon, F. (ed.) (1999) *Los condenados de la tierra*. Tafalla: Txalaparta.

Foucault, M. (2015) Surveiller et punir, in Foucault, M. (ed.) *Oeuvres II*. Paris: Gallimard, 261–613.

Franks, M. (2002) Feminisms and Cross-ideological Feminist Social Research: Standpoint, Situatedness and Positionality – Developing Cross-ideological Feminist Research, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 3, 38–50.

Gardner, K. and Lewis, D. (1996) *Anthropology, development, and the post-modern challenge*. London: Pluto Press.

Gobierno de Chile (2004) *Política de nuevo trato con los pueblos indígenas. Derechos Indígenas, Desarrollo con Identidad y Diversidad Cultural*. Santiago: Gobierno de Chile.

Goetschel, L. (2018) The Interaction of Peace Research and Local Context, in Jones, B. (ed.) *Knowledge for Peace: Transitional Justice, Knowledge Production and an Agenda for Research*. Swisspeace, 12-16.

Grosfoguel, R. (2013) The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century, *Human Architecture: Journal of the sociology of self-knowledge*, 1, 73-90.

-
- Hale, C.R. and Millaman, R. (2005) Cultural Agency and Political Struggle in the Era of Indio Permitido, in Sommer, D. (ed.) *Cultural Agency in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 281–305.
- Haraway, D. (1988) Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, *Feminist Studies*, 14, 575.
- Machado Araoz, H. (2013) Orden neocolonial, extractivismo y ecología política de las emociones, *RBSE-Revista Brasileira de Sociologia da Emoção*, 12(34), 11–43.
- Melero, N. (2011) El paradigma crítico y los aportes de la investigación acción participativa en la transformación de la realidad social: un análisis desde las ciencias sociales, *Cuestiones Pedagógicas*, 21, 339–355.
- Mignolo, W.D. (2017) Coloniality is Far from Over, and So Must Be Decoloniality, *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, 43(1), 38–45.
- Mignolo, W.D. (2014) Spirit out of bounds returns to the East: The closing of the social sciences and the opening of independent thoughts, *Current Sociology*, 62, 584–602.
- Ministerio de Desarrollo Social (MDS) (2017) Casen 2015. Pueblos Indígenas: Síntesis de resultados, available at: <http://observatorio.ministeriodesarrollosocial.gob.cl/> (25 May 2020).
- Ministerio de Desarrollo Social (MDS) (2018) *Programa de Desarrollo y Fomento Indígena. Convenio CONADI-CORFO*, available at: <http://www.senado.cl/site/presupuesto/2018/cumplimiento/Glosas%202018/primera%20subcomision/21%20MDS/987%20MDS.pdf> (25 May 2020).
- Platteau, J.P. (2004) Monitoring Elite Capture in Community-Driven Development, *Development Change*, 35, 223–246.
- Quijano, A. (2000) Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social, *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 11, 342–386.
- Quijano, A., Clímaco, D.A. and Quijano, A. (2014) *Cuestiones y horizontes: de la dependencia histórico-estructural a la colonialidad/descolonialidad del poder: antología esencial*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO.
- Sardar, Z. (1999) Development and the Locations of Eurocentrism, in Munck, R. and O’Hearn, D. (eds.) *Critical Development Theory: Contributions to a New Paradigm*. London: Zed Books, 44–62.
- Schöneberg, J. (2019) Imagining Postcolonial-Development Studies: Reflections on Positionalities and Research Practices, in Baud, I., Basile, E. and Kontinen, T. (eds.) *Building Development Studies for the New Millennium*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 97–116.
- Vergara, J., Foerster, R. and Gundermann, H. (2005) Instituciones mediadoras, legislación y movimiento indígena de Dasin a Conadi (1953–1994), *Atenea*, 491, 71–85.
-